

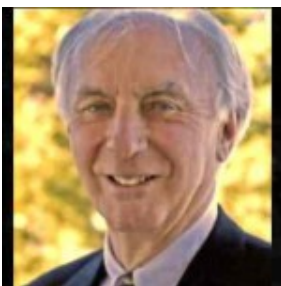
Crime scene work nothing like what's on TV

By Ted Long

Crime scene investigation was the focus of this week's sheriff's citizen group. We were educated on the role and procedures of the El Dorado County sheriff's crime scene team. We saw everything from beginning of an investigation to the use of evidence in the courtroom.

El Dorado County does not have a dedicated crime scene team, it instead has deputies trained in CSI, and they perform normal patrol functions until there is a need for at crime scene investigation. Some counties, we were told, contract out CSI, or use civilian trained investigators. This way they only pay them when they are working.

The first thing we were told is that the reality is nothing like television, other than the crime scene taping. One might get the impression from the drama shows that it is an exciting, hands-on operation that makes or breaks most cases. The description we heard is more of a detailed, take your time kind of a job where much of the results are generated in a lab a long way away, with the dramatic results disclosed in months not hours.



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They have a van dedicated to their use, which carries all

their equipment. They must identify the scene, protect it, and then painstakingly search it including a high-tech vacuum cleaner. The obvious are the shell casings, the knife or other weapon and the victim. They photograph everything and carefully mark locations and time.

Unlike TV, evidence is put in paper bags, not envelopes or plastic bags; the reason is that the paper breaths and controls the determination and condition of the evidence. We did a fingerprint taking exercise, which went poorly for me, demonstrating the need for training and practice.

As usual, the officers were friendly and answered questions. We saw pictures of the process of investigating, collecting of evidence and even the examination of a dead body. The need for a "chain of custody" to allow admissibility of evidence was demonstrated and the need for a careful, accurate handling was underlined.

Contrary to popular belief, it is not a speedy process, fingerprints and DNA evidence as well as fibers and other particular evidence must be sent to Sacramento for processing and identification. We were told that physical crimes come first and property crimes may never get done. The officer explained that all property crime evidence goes to the back of the line, to the point where they may get a phone call four or five months later from the lab asking if they still need the work done. Given that defendants have a right to a speedy trial it may be useless to ever expect processing and use in a court case in property cases, such as burglary.

Another interesting evening in Placerville, learning that television crime shows make be just drama and not much reality.

Ted Long is a South Lake Tahoe resident participating in the El Dorado County Sheriff's Citizens Academy.